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# **Migration and Global Environmental Change**

## **CS10: The impact of environmental change on labour migration from Nepal to the Gulf States**

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# Introduction

The Himalayan country of Nepal is often understood as a 'place' of fragility, in terms of both fragile environment and fragile livelihoods. Important work on Nepal, including *Resources and Population* by Macfarlane (1976), *The Himalayan Dilemma* by Ives and Messerli (1989), 'Food Crisis in Nepal' by Bohle and Adhikari (1998) and *Nepal in Crisis* by Blaikie and colleagues (2001, 2002), have suggested that there are severe environmental and livelihood crises in Nepal. How have these 'crises' shaped labour migration from Nepal to various global destinations, the Gulf States in particular, that have emerged as one of the lucrative destinations for Nepalis? Given that labour migration has historically played a key role in sustaining rural livelihoods in Nepal and forms an important part of the economy of the Gulf States, how might we foresee the impact of environmental changes, both in Nepal and the Gulf States, on migration from Nepal?

At the very outset it is useful to set a few parameters for this paper. First, this paper is based on a brief review of secondary evidence on environmental and socioeconomic changes and outmigration pattern in Nepal. It is neither meant to offer original evidence nor an exhaustive review of evidence of environmental change and outmigration from Nepal. Second, this paper was specifically commissioned to look at labour migration from Nepal to the Gulf States. Therefore, although a very brief reference is made to wider context of migration in/from Nepal, the main focus of the paper is on labour migration to the Gulf States in the context of environmental changes in Nepal. Third, it is not the purpose of this paper to attempt a causal analysis between environmental change and outmigration to the Gulf States but rather to look at how environmental changes might relate to various drivers of outmigration from Nepal.

There is very little empirical evidence linking environmental changes and migration in Nepal. Based on a review of existing literature dealing with aspects of migration, environmental change and social change in Nepal, this paper is an attempt to understand how environmental changes in Nepal is affecting drivers of outmigration from Nepal. It outlines the existing nature, pattern and significance of labour migration and its contribution to the livelihoods of migrants and their households, and how it is directly impacted not just by environmental change in the Himalayan country of Nepal but also by the larger global processes linked to dynamic nature of global capital and labour circulation, ideas associated with modernity, shrinking livelihood opportunities in Nepal, political interregnum, and formal and informal networks and recruitment agencies that sustain the migration flow. Based on available evidence, this paper looks at how labour migration can contribute to development and adaptation in the face of environmental change in Nepal. It explores ways of looking forward and thus implications for policy response.

In the following paragraphs, this paper provides a brief overview of the environmental, social or economic fragility in the sending context that has shaped labour migration from Nepal and how migration can be seen as a dynamic response by households to manage their livelihoods amid fragile socioeconomic and environmental context. The next section discusses trends in migration and remittances with specific emphasis on the Gulf States. It shows that migration to the Gulf States has emerged as the most dynamic feature of Nepali economy and society and it is likely to remain an important destination of migration in the years to come. The following section, then, presents an analysis of how migration to the Gulf States may be vulnerable to environmental, economic and political shocks and the changing economy of the Gulf States and how this in turn may have an impact on Nepali migrants.

## The sending context: fragile but dynamic?

Like communities throughout the Himalayan region, those in Nepal are facing rapid changes in their environmental and political–economic contexts. Population growth, climate variation, various forms of modernisation, market expansion and globalisation have put tremendous pressure on the communities living in fragile Nepalese environments. These rapid changes have exposed the communities to various forms of risks and shaped their ability to respond to them.

Since the 1970s there has been a growing scholarly and policy debate on the manner in which degradation of mountain environments led to significant declines in mountain agriculture production and deforestation and thereby directly affecting people's livelihoods. Different scholars have argued that increasing demand for food for a growing population has put tremendous pressure on the available land and forest resources. Based on his in-depth fieldwork, from as early as 1968, in the middle hills, Macfarlane (1976) found that population growth resulted in significant environmental consequences in the mountains in the form of deforestation and soil degradation. He saw over-exploitation of mountain environments by the growing population as a major cause of concern, and speculated that there would be no forest cover left by 2000. Eric Eckholm, a *New York Times* science editor, wrote about the environmental crisis in the region in his book *Losing Ground* (1976), in which he linked population growth to deforestation and soil erosion in the Himalayan region, which are presumed to cause downstream flooding. In a chapter titled 'Refugees from Shangri-La: deteriorating mountain environments' Eckholm discussed the relationship between environmental degradation in the Himalayas with the hill-Tarai outmigration leading to potential crisis in the arai. Ives and Messerli (1989) labelled this environmental concern as 'The Theory of Himalayan Degradation', which has since attracted significant academic and policy response in the region. In line with the spirit of the argument, the Asian Development Bank predicted in 1982 that there is a 'distinct danger that all accessible forests, especially in the Hills, will be eliminated within less than 20 years'. Over-exploitation of agricultural land, deforestation and soil degradation by the growing population and its direct impact on food security and well-being of the population in the region has remained a consistent policy concern for the last five decades.

The concern over deteriorating mountain environments led to policy response encouraging population relocation from the mountains to Tarai so as to ease the population pressure on the fragile highlands (Ojha, 1983; Shrestha and Conway, 1985). While the Tarai was initially thought to be comparatively safer from environmental pressure and a potential region for agricultural growth and possibly an economic engine of Nepal, it has since turned into a fragile place with rapid environmental, demographic and socioeconomic changes leading to regular floods and drought. The population in the Tarai experience floods every year during the monsoon season and their impact has grown in severity and regularity in the recent years (Moench and Dixit, 2004).

Although the theory of Himalayan degradation has been repeatedly criticised for failing to take account of the accurate picture of change in the region (Ives and Messerli, 1989; Guthman, 1997; Blaikie and Coppard, 1998), new forms of crises have emerged. Decline in agricultural productivity and its direct impact on survival and health remains a serious concern. Land productivity has stagnated despite increasing use of fertilisers, which is a clear indicator of land degradation and the unsustainable use of natural resources (Bhole and Adhikari, 1998). Since the 1990s Nepal has changed from a net exporter to a net importer of food. Declining agricultural production has depressed the rural economy and is showing worrying signs of

increased rates of malnutrition in rural households. With low levels of income and falling agricultural production coupled with increased reliance on the market for food, households must now allocate 60% of their household budgets for food alone and the poorest households allocate almost three-quarters of their incomes to food (WFP, 2010). In 2010, the World Food Programme reported that 43 of Nepal's 75 districts faced food deficits and 23 were chronically food insecure (WFP, 2010). Under these conditions, survival for a large and growing portion of the Nepalese rural population has become a permanent livelihood crisis (Bohle and Adhikari, 1998: 332). Similarly, a group of British social scientists who had highlighted this livelihoods crisis based on their original fieldwork in 1970s (Blaikie *et al.*, 2001) went back to re-study their target population after 20 years and found that Nepal is still stuck in the same 'crisis' it was 20 years ago. They stated, 'the most important empirical conclusion about social change in rural western Nepal over 20 years is the degree of its continuity' (Blaikie *et al.*, 2002: 1267).

The people in Nepal have managed livelihoods amid various forms of crises. One of the main responses has been migration in search of work opportunities. A study conducted by the Institute of Social and Economic Transition in the Hills of the Koshi basin found that there have been significant changes in the environment where water availability has declined over the last decade. Worsening water availability in the hills and mountains had affected local livelihoods and daily life in the villages in many ways, and temporary migration was one of the key responses of the households (Dixit *et al.*, 2009). After their re-study, Blaikie *et al.* (2002) concluded that migrant remittances had played an important role in contributing to sustainable rural life more than their original study from the 1970s emphasised. Similarly, in a more recent account, reflecting on 30 years of change in the same middle hill village, Macfarlane found that the communities studied had responded to ecological collapse by outmigration, although he noted that people left behind were bearing the burden of outmigration, visible in their material impoverishment. It would appear that the scenario Macfarlane originally presented of "no forest by the new millennium" depended on a simulation that had no input from the human capacity to take cognizance of change in environmental surroundings, and to alter practices of resources use so as to avoid disaster' (Campbell, 2001: 111). What this means is that having acknowledged aspects of fragility that characterise the context in Nepal, we should also look at the 'dynamic' agency of people who have responded to the crisis in different ways. 'Nepalese farmers are by no means passive, inflexible and ignorant victim of unsustainable development, they are highly active, adaptive and dynamic actors' (Bohle and Adhikari, 1998: 330). One of the key responses to these 'crises' has been to intensify labour migration and mobility. Therefore, migration and mobility is not necessarily a pathology but a normal or usual part of people's livelihoods (Sharma, 2008) and has potential for development and adaptation in the face of environmental change in fragile places.

Based on data from a longitudinal study in Chitwan district in Nepal, Massey *et al.* (2010) found that environmental change is more strongly related to short- than long-distance mobility. They found that short-distance mobility is affected by perceived declines in productivity, declining land cover, and increasing time required to gather firewood. Long-distance mobility was affected by perceived decline in productivity but the effect was found to be weaker than in the case of short-term mobility. The authors of this study found that there is very little evidence that rising population density, declining vegetation or a growing scarcity of organic inputs play any role in promoting departures from the Chitwan Valley, and the long-distance mobility provoked by declining agricultural productivity is relatively weak. They argue that the deeper underlying causes of environmental migration are not only related to the severe environmental calamities but also to a more gradual deterioration of conditions and to subjective perceptions about the degree of deterioration. Therefore, it is not useful to conceptualise outmigration as a response to environmental migration but view it within the broader process of socioeconomic and livelihood changes.



# Trend in migration and remittances

Migration, both internal and external, is a part of the life experience of a very large number of Nepalis, and has historically been a significant feature of household livelihoods amid a fragile socioeconomic and environmental context (Hitchcock, 1961; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1995; Whelpton, 2005). The *first* wave of migration began in the 18th and 19th centuries when the state policies on land and labour, and agrarian changes, forced peasants in the hills to move out of their land and seek their livelihoods elsewhere, both within Nepal and across the border into India (Regmi, 1978; Hutt, 1997). The work opportunities in tea plantations, construction and coal mining in adjoining Indian states attracted Nepalis to go and work as labourers. Labour migration of young men started systematically with the recruitment to serve in the army of the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh and then in the British army in India. Although the Nepali state resisted the recruitment of Nepalis by the British until 1885 with the concern that returning army servicemen would bring revolutionary ideas into Nepal, the policy changed in 1886, allowing for the recruitment of Nepalis in the British Army, and this practice has continued for more than 125 years to the present day. There has been substantial temporary labour migration from the hills to the plains in order to make up for the low incomes in hills areas and to cover the needs of local rural communities throughout the year. Such a quest for livelihoods has created durable exchanges across Nepal and across the border into India. The *second* wave of migration started in the mid-1980s, accelerated in the 1990s and dramatically increased in the mid-2000s, when Nepalis continued to migrate to work in India and began to migrate to new destinations, mainly the Gulf States and Malaysia. Decline in agricultural production and lack of economic opportunities in Nepal coupled with rapid economic growth in the Gulf States after the price hike of oil in 1973, opening up of labour recruitment agencies and the decentralisation of passport issuance in Nepal contributed to outmigration of unskilled and semi-skilled Nepalis to the Gulf States, where they mainly work in the construction and service sectors. Over the years, such flows have been sustained by both the social networks and the active presence of labour recruitment agencies. Migration flow from Nepal is part of a larger global process linked to the dynamic nature of global capital and labour circulation (Castles, 2011). The growth of service sector and associated construction and maintenance work, contract and casual labour combined with demographic changes and subsequent requirements of labour for new types of service industries, such as care work, in the Gulf States has led to demand for migrant labour from countries such as Nepal. These migrations have created new transnational links, connecting very distant countries, cultures and economies.

Both men and women have been migrating from Nepal over the 200 years, although the nature and pattern of migration has changed over the years. In the past, women's migration was largely limited to short-distance mobility and migration, mostly accompanied by their husbands and family members. Since the 1990s, Nepali women have begun to migrate on their own to international destinations, a trend which has dramatically increased albeit not without gendered discrimination, risks and control<sup>1</sup>.

Recent estimates suggest that there may be as many as 3 million Nepalis, i.e. about 10% of the total population, working abroad including in neighbouring India (World Bank, 2011). Females constitute 8% of the total number of migrants. This estimate is significantly higher than the official statistics. The estimated population of migrants in the past can be seen in

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<sup>1</sup> Media frequently report on the physical and sexual harassment of Nepali migrant women. In response, the Government of Nepal banned female migration to the Gulf States in 1998. Although the ban was lifted followed pressure from women's activist groups and civil society, it has been reimposed several times for those who go to work as domestic workers in the Gulf States.

various censuses<sup>2</sup>. According to the national Census, the number of Nepalis temporarily abroad rose significantly from 402,977 in 1981 to 762,181 in 2001, although it is difficult to get systematic data on the migrant destination.

Migrant remittances have played a key role in sustaining the rural economy and people's livelihoods during the decade-long Maoist conflict. The official contribution of remittances to Nepal's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009 was US\$2.7 billion, or 22% of the GDP. However, with large amounts also being sent outside the official banking system and including those from India, the actual contribution of remittances could be as high as 30% of Nepal's GDP (World Bank, 2011). Remittance from Nepalese abroad grew at 20% a year between 1995 and 96 and 2003 and 2004 rising from less than 3% of GDP in 1995–96 to about 12% by the end of 2003–04 (World Bank, 2006). This has had a phenomenal impact in the national economy and household livelihoods.

Data from National Living Standard surveys show that the average level of remittances at the household level increased from Nepali rupees (NRs) 3,500 (8.5% of mean per capital expenditure) in 1995–96 to nearly NRs 6,000 (15.8% of mean consumption) in 2003–04. The 2009 estimates suggest that a typical household receives NRs 41,000 in a year in remittances, which amounts to NRs 8,000 per person. A 2009 estimate suggests that for those households that receive remittances, they receive on average NRs 105,000 a year, which amounts to NRs 20,000 in per capita terms (World Bank, 2011). According to Nepal Living Standard surveys, the share of households receiving remittances, from within and outside of Nepal, rose from 23% in 1995–96 to 32% in 2003–04 and 55.8% in 2010.

The most recent data for 2009–10 from the Department of Foreign Employment Promotion shows that Nepalis migrate to work in 105 countries globally. The Gulf States have become one of the key destinations since the mid-1990s and certainly also one of the most dynamic phenomena (Graner and Gurung, 2003). The trend over the last two decades show that 38% of Nepali migrants seeking work travel abroad to the Gulf States to work as contract workers, and are mediated by a chain of recruitment agencies. In the Gulf States, manufacturing (35%) and construction (21%) dominate the employment of Nepali workers. Unpublished records available from the Department of Labour shows that the official figure for the early 1990s was only 2,000, which increased to 6,500 in 1997–98 and 20,000 by 1999–2000. In 1997, Seddon *et al.* (2001) suggested that about 40,000 migrant workers from Nepal went to the Gulf States. Official statistics suggests that this number increased to 1,045,655 by 2009–10. This clearly suggests the growing popularity of migration to the Gulf States from Nepal. The latest official data show that Qatar (28.71%), Saudi Arabia (19.81%) and the United Arab Emirates (12.68%) account for popular destinations in the Gulf States (Nepal Government, 2010).

Despite the unofficial restrictions on working in the Gulf States, female migration has been increasingly significantly over the last several years. Official statistics recorded that, compared with only 316 female migrants in 2007, in 2008 a total of 11,007 migrated to 41 countries, suggesting a sharp rise, most likely due to the uplifting of the ban, in September 2007, to enter Gulf countries. Women who migrate to the Gulf States mainly work as care workers, and their demand has increased significantly over the years. Findings from the Nepal Migration Survey (World Bank, 2011) show that, compared with non-migrants, migrant population to the Gulf is predominantly male, i.e. only 6.3% of migrants to the Gulf are female.

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<sup>2</sup> Censuses tend to underestimate migrant stocks abroad because they do not account for seasonal/temporary migration accurately.



Looking at the place of origin, data from the Nepali Migration Survey (2009) show that the proportion of migrants to the Gulf States is high from rural areas (91.6%), eastern (41.8%) and western (26.5%) regions, and Tarai (59.1%). These areas send more migrants to the Gulf compared with the proportion of their population.

Gulf destinations remain the most important source of remittance for Nepal. Findings from the Nepal Migration Survey suggest that of the US\$2.5 billion of remittances from abroad (including from India), about half comes from the Gulf countries (US\$1.2 billion). This clearly shows that the remittances from the Gulf States, which is 48.9% of the total remittance, has a significant role in the economy of Nepal. On average, households with a migrant in the Gulf States receive US\$2,120, whereas the figure is US\$800 for those who receive from India and US\$4,050 for those who receive from developed countries. On average, the monthly salary of a migrant in the Gulf is about US\$230 per month. The average cost of migration to work in the Gulf States is about US\$1,430. This amount is about six times their monthly income and about 10 times their monthly savings. Migration is financed by savings, loans and by selling land, and about one-third of migrants use their own finances. Remittance behaviour of Nepali migrants in the Gulf shows that they tend to send their remittances using money transfer companies.

The excessive dependence on foreign remittance has its drawbacks. While there is very little evidence that the global financial crisis had a significant impact on migration flow or inward remittances, they did slow down during the recession period. The flow of Nepali migrant workers declined by 13% during the recession period. The official statistics show that 217,164 individuals left the country for employment in the year 2008–09 compared with 249,051 in 2007–08. Although the decline was not significant, it did indicate the nature of vulnerability associated with global economic downturn. A study commissioned by the BBC found that ‘the picture in the Gulf States, which has been heavily reliant on contract labour migration, is a mixed one – in part because the Gulf economies have experienced the recession very differently’ (Fix *et al.*, 2009: 7). This study noted that the migration flows from Nepal to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates fell and those to Saudi Arabia increased, reflecting the economic strength of the destination countries. The data from the Department of Foreign Employment Promotion reveal that the number of migrant workers leaving for the United Arab Emirates declined from 45,342 to 31,688 between 2007 and 08 and 2008 and 09. Qatar accepted 31% fewer migrants from Nepal (declining from 51,000 to 35,000). However, Nepali migrants leaving for Saudi Arabia, a country where public investments remain strong despite the drop in price for oil, increased by 15% to 48,749 during the most recent fiscal year, up from 42,394 in 2007–08. Sharma and Gurung (2009) indicate that there are three reasons why the number of Nepali migrants recently declined in the Gulf States. First, there has been a slowdown in the construction work that employed unskilled Nepali workers; second, many investors deferred construction work in the view of the economic slowdown; and third, many companies introduced heavy cuts in hiring labourers.

## Impact on the economy, poverty and livelihoods

International migration has become the most important economic activity in Nepal and remittances from the Gulf States form a key part in it. A recent study shows that 40% of migrant recipient households in Nepal are totally dependent on remittances and half of international remittances come from the Gulf States (World Bank, 2011). Such pervasiveness of migration challenges the notion that Nepal is a traditional and agrarian society. The nature of the households have transformed into multi-locale households with the outmigration of a large

number of men and an increasing number of women to various destinations. Remittance flow has further boosted the incorporation of Nepal into the global economy, as confirmed by the immediate opening of Western Union outlets in even the remotest areas, as soon as the road and telecommunications network reaches there.

The economic scale and impact of migration appears far more significant than the flow of foreign aid. Evidence suggests that migration contributed significantly to poverty reduction in Nepal. The World Bank reports that socioeconomic progress, or 'escape from poverty' between 2000 and 2009 was almost twice as fast for households with migrants than those without. The 11% decline in poverty incidence in Nepal between 1996 and 2004 was explained as due to remittances. Analysis by Nepal's Central Bureau of Statistics concluded that poverty would have declined by 5% instead of 11% if remittances had remained unchanged between the two surveys.

Based on an analysis of the Nepal Living Standard Surveys of 1996 (NLSS-I) and 2004 (NLSS-II), Lokshin *et al.* (2010) found that one-fifth of the poverty reduction in Nepal occurring between 1995 and 2004 can be attributed to higher levels of work-related migration and remittances sent home. Lokshin *et al.* (2010) concluded, 'in the absence of migration, the poverty rate would increase from the currently observed 30 per cent to 33.6 per cent, and the mean per capita expenditure would decline from NRs 15,000 to 14,000'. The results from the Nepal Living Standard Survey III (2010) show that there was an 18% decline in poverty between 2003 and 2010. All these studies help illuminate the relationship between remittances and poverty reduction, although they say nothing about whether remittances have contributed to reducing socioeconomic inequalities.

Outmigration has played an important role in securing rural livelihoods. It has remained a key response of households amid declining agriculture and livelihood insecurities. Outmigration has not only put less pressure on land and natural resources, but also migrant remittances have been particularly useful to meet subsistence, consumption and other daily needs of household members. Cash income from remittances plays an important role in meeting household expenses. Remittances have allowed households to continue with their farming, in particular to pay for the labour, fertilisers, seeds and other related expenses. The flow of remittances has created labouring opportunities for the poorer households that are unable to send their members abroad. The shortage of labour due to the high rate of outmigration has meant that the cost of hiring labour has increased, directly benefiting the labourers who are otherwise unable to outmigrate. Also, there are more opportunities for renting land. As migration and remittance exchange gets embedded in the rural economy and culture, it has become an important part of household livelihoods.

Both the practice and ideas of migration to the Gulf States has become so pervasive that it might be useful to see it as a rule rather than as an exception (Sharma, 2008). It is not an exaggeration to say that the culture of migration has become so embedded in Nepali society that it has become a *rite of passage* especially among young men and women. It has also become a matter of prestige and status for the households. Migrants do not just transform their economic investment in migration and labour power into remittances, they are also important actors of cultural change. Although economic gains are often highlighted as the impact of migration and one of the reasons why people migrate, experiencing the wider world of consumption and ideas of modernity are often the main reasons why young adults migrate and what they bring back with them. This is self-evident when we look at the returnee migrants. Whether it is a tape-recorder brought by a far-west migrant from Mumbai, a flat-screen television brought by a Gulf returnee, a sophisticated mobile phone brought by a skilled migrant from the UK or gold ornaments brought by Nepali women workers working in Kuwait and Saudi

Arabia, they all show that migrants are not just workers but also consumers. Learning new languages and skills, forming new social networks and gaining understanding of the wider world are all a part of migration experience.

Migration is considered by young men, and a growing number of women, simply as a thing to do. A large number of educated unemployed in Nepal do not want to be viewed as 'faltu' (useless), and migration offers an opportunity for them to escape the category of 'faltu' (Sharma, 2008). This probably explains why an ever increasing number of men and women continue to travel to work in often exploitative and difficult situations in different countries, often with very little economic return to their investment. Thus, while migration to the Gulf States may not always make sense in terms of significant economic returns, it certainly makes sense in terms of broader conception of household livelihoods and young men and women's identities.

## Future scenario

The Gulf States are the third-largest destination region in the world for migrants after North America and Europe. The scale of foreign labour migration into the Gulf States is a recent phenomenon and was estimated to be between 800,000 and 1.25 million in the early 1970s. The number increased to 4.4 million by 1985. Despite the attempt by the Gulf States to discourage foreign labour and encourage national workers, the number of foreign labourers increased sharply to 7.1 million by 1999 (which represented almost 70% of the workforce in the Gulf States) and 10.6 million by 2008. The steady increase in the number of foreign labourers, mainly from South Asia, in these countries is a result of a combination of liberal labour immigration policies and lax enforcement of labour regulations that allows private sector employers freedom to determine salaries and employment conditions and offer cheaper salary to foreign workers much below the average salary of national employees (Winckler, 2010).

The increasing number of foreign workers has raised popular concerns among citizens in the Gulf States on its impact on politics, culture and the economy. It is very likely that the Gulf States will, in the future, adopt control measures to restrict and close down immigration routes. However, the Gulf States are likely to face a major tension between the political need to control immigration and economic necessity to bring foreign labour. Such tension may lead to an increase in illegal and undocumented immigration, causing significant trouble to the migrant workers. Paradoxically, the policies on possible restriction on foreign labour are unlikely to be effective given the rentier relationship between the rulers and the merchant elite in the Gulf States (Winckler, 2010). Such a process of restriction on the use of foreign labour will eventually affect Nepali workers, but Nepalis are likely to be the last group to be affected by such policies because they are one of the cheapest labourers in the labour market and are less known for demanding rights unlike their Indian or Bangladeshi counterparts.

The rapid economic growth in neighbouring India and China may open up increased and attractive employment opportunities for Nepali migrants to these countries, although it is likely to depend primarily on the labour availability in these countries. Although Nepal shares an open border with India and has historically supplied Nepali labourers to the police, army, agriculture and service sectors, contributing to the growth of the Indian economy, the recent debates on the regulation of the open border and increased securitisation of the border could make it relatively difficult for Nepalis to travel to work in India. On the other hand, although Nepal does not share an open border with China, one could speculate that the ongoing construction of roads through the Himalayan border may facilitate increased population mobility between these two countries.

Overall, despite probable control measures to restrict immigration of foreign workers from South Asia, the demand for Nepali labour migration to the Gulf and other countries is likely to increase because of the booming construction, maintenance and service sector in the region. Qatar, host of the 2022 football World Cup, is likely to attract a large number of Nepali migrants, initially in the construction sector and later in the service sector. The attraction of employment in the Gulf States, despite some serious drawbacks, is likely to remain as strong as ever not only because of Nepalis' socioeconomic and environmental fragility, coupled with political instability, but also because migration to the Gulf States offers an opportunity for unemployed young adults to prove their 'worth'.

Looking at the current trend, young adults from Nepal will continue to aspire to migration to the Gulf States. As the number of educated unemployed increases, they are likely to see migration to the Gulf States as a usual livelihood strategy in search of economic security and 'worth'. This would mean that there is likely to be an increased number of multi-locale households in Nepal, and remittances will continue to shape the political economy of Nepal. With its inability to create job opportunities, the Nepali state will continue to encourage migration of young adults to the Gulf States as long as such opportunities exist in those countries. As the entire economy gets overshadowed by remittances, associated commodification and market penetration in everyday consumption, it is the poorer households that are unable to send migrants who will face increased risk of marginalisation and destitution, as highlighted by Macfarlane (2001).

Not only will remittances from the Gulf States continue to be an important aspect of Nepali economy, but also various service sectors including banks, remittance transfer companies, labour recruitment agencies, telecommunication companies, real estate, construction and airlines among others are likely to grow further with important implications for Nepal's economy. Because successful migrants and their households favour investment in real estate in market areas, land values are likely continue to rise sharply in small towns, cities and markets, and the construction industry will boom significantly. This will be evident by the expansion of markets in rural areas, in particular of hardware shops in roadside bazaars, and significant consumption of cement, concrete, brick and iron rods among others. We can anticipate that the inflow of remittances will significantly increase the relocation of households from rural areas to nearby cities and town, and such a trend is already visible. Such relocation from rural to urban areas is likely to ease pressure on agriculture and environment in rural areas but will also put increased pressure on resources in urban centres, towns and peri-urban areas. Rural economies will become more integrated with the urban market, significantly changing the characteristics of rural Nepal and households.

## Conclusion

Amid the degradation of mountain environment, declining agricultural production and socioeconomic changes in Nepal, outmigration is on the rise. As Massey *et al.* (2010) argue, environment is only one of the factors that influence long-distance mobility and it is by no means the most important.

It is not immediately clear if the economic growth in India and China will necessarily translate into increased labouring opportunities for Nepalis in these countries. As long as Nepal and India share open borders, Nepalis will continue to migrate to India, although the current declining trend of migration to India may reverse should there be restriction in work opportunities in the Gulf States. Outmigration is probably one key option that is likely to be available to the households and the growing number of unemployed youth.

Based on the available evidence, this paper suggests that labour migration must be understood, both analytically and empirically, in the context of rapid livelihood and environmental change. Viewing Nepali migrants not merely as 'reactors' of large-scale livelihood insecurities brought by various factors including environmental changes and associated changes in agrarian and other forms of livelihoods but also as active 'actors' who mobilise their livelihood strategies to cope with risks associated with it allows a much more dynamic understanding of the impact of environmental change on labour migration from Nepal, and this has obvious implications for policy response.

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